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## The Clipper Visits Dr. DeBlois

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I was 5 years old. I was sitting on the front steps of my house on Washington St. watching the world go by.

A shiny black Jaguar lined with red leather came along. Magically, it stopped in front of the house. In it was a smiling lady whom I had seen many times boarding her big boat at the Yacht Club.



Dr. Elizabeth DeBlois, M.D.

"Would you like to come for a ride?" she asked. Would I! I ran in the house to ask permission. Then I clambered into the car and off we went. Thus began a friendship of nearly 25 years.

The smiling lady was Dr. Elizabeth DeBlois of Beacon Hill and Wadsworth Lane. And the fact that she was a doctor impressed me.

Born at the turn of the century, "Dr. Betty," as she likes to be called, made her first appearance at her parents' summer home in Ipswich. She was an only child and her mother, a Proper Bostonian, wanted her daughter to have a conventional Boston childhood.

But Betty had other ideas. Something of a tomboy, she was always "into something." She and a neighboring tomboy delighted to climb the backyard

tracheal and nasoendotracheal anesthesia make surgery a cinch compared to years ago."

The year of internship passed quickly for Dr. Betty. She set up her practice of general medicine and obstetrics on Bay State Rd. in Boston's Back Bay. She admits that her practice was quite large, much of it obstetrical.

"In those days," she said, "we didn't know a great deal about pre-natal care. Often you wouldn't see a patient until delivery." Most of her deliveries were at New England Hospital, where she also admitted other patients, young and old.

Perhaps the most intriguing story Dr. Betty told me was about a Christmas Eve spent delivering a baby in Ipswich. She had summered in Ipswich and a Polish immigrant family had done some work for her father.

The head of this family came to Dr. Betty and told her that his wife was with child and asked her if she could help. She agreed to deliver the baby. "It was Christmas Eve about 5 o'clock," she said, "I was just leaving my office when the phone rang. It was the Polish gentleman telling me his wife was in labor."

"As I was talking with him, I glanced out my window and saw that it was snowing." Her mother had planned a Christmas Eve gathering of friends "on the Hill" and was upset that Dr. Betty wouldn't attend.

Instead she located a nurse at the New England Hospital to help her with the delivery as it was in the home. "I had a new Cadillac and I had to get down on my back in the snow to put on chains for the trip." So after picking up her assistant, they were on their way.

"It was a hell of a ride in a blizzard and took nearly 3 hours." When they arrived, the woman was in early labor and it was going to be a long cold night. The patient and her family of 7 lived in what was actually a shack and heat came from an old stove.

Dr. Betty and her nurse took care of the patient all night. When not with her, they would lie on the floor near the stove trying to keep warm. Finally, about dawn of Christmas Day, Dr. Betty delivered the infant.

"They named her Elizabeth after me." Dr. Betty didn't leave until she had celebrated the infant's birth by drinking some wine and eating Polish cake.

Dr. DeBlois remained in general practice for 2 years, but her real love was obstetrics, but being a woman made it difficult to find an obstetrical residency. She had hoped to get training at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, but never did.

Having always been interested in allergy and problems of the upper respiratory tract, she took

"big ones" -- dolphin, marlin. "I used to love a good fight." She still enjoys her boat, but doesn't cruise any more as her captain died 2 years ago. "Captain Betty" could often be seen strutting down the yacht club pier, puffing on a cigar, and carrying a dog in a sling.

Dr. Betty is religious, and is not only an active parishioner of the Church of the Advent in Boston, but also an associate of the Sisters of St. Margaret in Boston and Duxbury.

Two years ago, I saw my old friend receive an honorary doctor of science degree from Dr. Jean Meyer at the Tufts University Commencement.

Dr. Betty marched up to the platform with her distinctive and characteristic walk, to receive thanks from grateful colleagues. Earlier this year a laboratory at the medical school was named in her honor.

The years have passed and Dr. Betty readily admits that medicine has drastically changed. It has been nearly half a century since her general practice on Bay State Rd. However, the same brass shingle given to her by her father following her graduation from medical school continues to hang at 412 Beacon St. No more patients come and go as they did and no more early morning surgery. But a lot of memories.

I consider myself fortunate to be a friend of Dr. Elizabeth De Blois, she has taught me a great deal about people and medicine. I hope a little of her philosophy has influenced my thinking and patient care.

But Mrs. DeBlois persisted and Betty was sent to a select private school for girls, and in time, was forced to make her debut. Her father was her staunchest ally. He took her to all the Harvard football games and taught her to shoot and fish. She was the son he never had.

And when she announced that she wanted to become a doctor, he gave her his support, although Mrs. DeBlois felt that woman's place was in the home.

So in the days when young ladies of the Four Hundred went to tea parties, married eminently suitable Proper Bostonians and lived happily ever after, Betty went to Vassar College.

While other "gentlewomen" were studying English and the classics, Betty was in the laboratory completing her "pre-med" course. "I never enjoyed chemistry," she said, "but found mathematics and physics intriguing." At Vassar, Betty was, as she put it, "more active in sports than academics."

In 1925 she was graduated from Vassar and headed on to the prestigious College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. I asked her how she became interested in medicine. She said that during the great influenza epidemic, she volunteered with the Red Cross caring for victims.

At the time she went to medical school, women in medicine had a rough time. Often she was unable to attend student clerkships because of the favoritism afforded her male counterparts.

As she had been close to relatives and friends, life at Columbia was difficult. There were only 2 women in her class. After a year at Columbia, she returned to Boston. Harvard Medical School was not very willing to admit women to their classes, so Betty attended Tufts Medical School. The years were hard. She spent most of the time at the Boston City Hospital and the Haymarket Relief Station. On a stormy night she would "sew up heads, set a few bones," and often "ride the ambulance."

Upon graduation from Tufts, she served internship at the Boston Hospital for Women, now the Dimmock Community Health Center in Roxbury. It was during that time that she became interested in obstetrics and she concentrated on this.

"When I was an intern," she said, "I used to sleep on a stretcher and wait for the delivery. Babies always seem to arrive in the middle of the night."

Dr. Betty performed what she called "a fair amount of surgery" that year. Anesthesia was primitive, the old "dome ether" technique was used. "I remember one gall bladder operation we were performing on an obese woman," she said. "She would move and gag."

"I had identified the cystic duct and vein and was tracing the anatomical landmarks. It took about 3 hours to get that gall bladder out, because of poor anesthesia. Today, anesthesia is elegant. Endo-

training at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, where she is now on the honorary staff. She closed her office on Bay State Rd. after completing her otolaryngological residency and her days of delivering babies came to an end.

Dr. Betty became the assistant to Dr. Francis Weille, a noted otorhinolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat doctor) with whom she remained until his death. She not only covered his practice but managed her own as well.

Her days began early, at 5:30 usually, as she would complete her rounds in time to do surgery. Every day she assisted Dr. Weille in the operating room. Dr. Weille and Dr. DeBlois had many interesting patients. Once Dr. Weille sent her to the Ritz Carlton to look down the throat of Spencer Tracy. "He was such a grand man," she said, "luckily, it was only laryngitis."

Dr. Weille and Dr. DeBlois co-authored several articles in various professional journals. She writes extremely well. She has always kept a diary and her early diaries read like novels.

Dr. Betty also had her own patients. Many were poor and I doubt that a bill was ever mentioned. Several would come in every week just to chat or receive a diathermy treatment. I often asked her why she let them keep coming back when there was nothing wrong. "It does them good," she said, "they're lonely." Skillful and kind, she treated young and old, rich and poor, the same. I was thrilled to watch a tonsilectomy performed by Dr. Betty and it was amazing to see the skill she had. I remember the argument she had with the anesthesiologist. She wanted to do the patient in the tonsil chair. Historically, tonsilectomies were performed in a sitting position. Now, with the advent of sophisticated anesthesia, it is preferable to have the patient in a supine position. Dr. Betty won and did the tonsilectomy in the tonsil chair.

For many years she taught at Tufts Medical School, always taking personal interest in her students.

Dr. Betty loves the sea, and her boat, the "Fantee," attests to that. "I was brought up on boats." Her early summers were spent on her family's boat, cruising off the coast of Maine. She received her first boat as a graduation present.

Since then she has owned many boats. She much prefers sailing to power, but now she can't handle all the sails and lines. Her boat, the "Fantee," was named for one of her grandfather's Clipper ships, who was in the East India trade. The "Fantee" is a luxurious and comfortable boat and many winter vacations were spent cruising off the Florida coast and the Caribbean.

She loves to fish -- especially big game fishing. Every year in February she would fly to Fort Lauderdale, where the "Fantee" was docked. She had a captain and guide and she would fish for the